

## Message Text

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ACTION NEA-10

INFO OCT-01 EUR-12 IO-13 ISO-00 SAA-01 CIAE-00 DODE-00  
PM-05 H-01 INR-10 L-03 NSAE-00 NSC-05 PA-01  
SP-02 SS-15 ICA-11 ACDA-12 AID-05 OMB-01 TRSE-00  
SSM-03 /111 W  
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P 140942Z JUL 78  
FM AMEMBASSY DAMASCUS  
TO SECSTATE WASHDC PRIORITY 8781  
INFO AMEMBASSY AMMAN  
USINT BAGHDAD  
AMEMBASSY BEIRUT PRIORITY  
AMEMBASSY CAIRO  
AMCONSUL JERUSALEM  
AMEMBASSY JIDDA  
AMEMBASSY KUWAIT  
AMEMBASSY ROME  
AMEMBASSY TEL AVIV  
USMISSION USUN  
SECDEF WASHDC  
DIA WASHDC

S E C R E T SECTION 1 OF 2 DAMASCUS 4019

E.O. 11652: GDS  
TAGS: PEPR, SY, IS, LE  
SUBJ: ASSAD'S DILEMMA

REF: BEIRUT 3840

1. SUMMARY: ASSAD'S CURRENT CONFRONTATION WITH CHAMOUN AND THE PHALANGE IS PERHAPS THE MOST SERIOUS CHALLENGE HE HAS FACED IN LEBANON. HE APPEARS INCREASINGLY CONVINCED THAT THE INHERENT CONTRADICTIONS IN HIS GOALS AND THOSE OF HIS LEBANESE RIGHTEST OPPONENTS ARE TOO GREAT TO BE OVERCOME BY POLITICAL AND DIPLOMATIC MEANS ALONG. THIS, AND

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THE MUTUALLY SUSPICIOUS AND SELF-REINFORCING PERCEPTIONS EACH PARTY HOLDS OF THE OTHER, MAKE IT LIKELY THAT THE CURRENT CLASH IS BUT ONE IN A RECURRENT PATTERN OF VIOLENCE WHICH WILL EVENTUALLY CULMINATE IN AN ALL-OUT TEST. TO DATE, DESPITE SYRIA'S SOMETIMES BRUTAL BOMBARDMENT OF EAST BEIRUT, IT HAS NOT YET OPED FOR THIS FINAL CONFRONTATION. AMONG OTHER REASONS IS THE FEAR OF WAR WITH ISRAEL, BUT THE

STAKES ARE GIGHER THIS TIME THAN ON PREVIOUS OCCASIONS WHEN ASSAD BACKED DOWN IN THE FACE OF ISRAELI THREATS. FOR IF ASSAD CANNOT REDUCE THE POWER OF THE RIGHTIST MILITIAS, HIS OWN POLITICAL GAMBLE IN LEBANON IS LOST. HE MAY EVENTUALLY HAVE TO CHOOSE BETWEEN RISKING A FIGHT WITH ISREAL ON A PAINFUL DISENGAGEMENT FROM LEBANON. IN THE LATTER CASE, HE WILL ARM AND SUPPORT THE PALESTINAINS AND THE OTHER ENEMIES OF CHAMOUN AND GEMAYEL. ASSAD WILL DO EVERYTHING IN HIS POWER TO AVOID SUCH A STARK AND DANGEROUS CHOICE, BUT, IF HE DOES NOT SUCCEED, THE CHOICE FOR THE US MAY BOIL DOWN TO ACQUIESCING IN EITHER FULL BLOWN PARTITION OF LEBANON OR HELPING SYRIA IMPOSE ITS AUTHORITY, AT LEAST, FOR THE SHORT TERM.

END SUMMARY.

2. WHILE SYRIAN ADF COMMANDER SAMI KHATIB IN REFTEL MAY HAVE OVERDREWNN THE RELATIONSHIP BETWEEN ASSAD'S ABILITY TO RETAIN POWER AND THE OUTCOME OF HIS INTERVENTION IN LEBANON, THE IMPLICATIONS FOR ASSAD OF FAILURE IN LEBANON ARE CERTAINLY SERIOUS GIVEN THE LACK OF ENTHUSIASM WITH WHICH MANY BAATH PARTY AND MILITARY LEADERS INITIALLY GREETED HIS DECISION TO TAKE ON THE PALESTINIANS AND LEBANESE LEFT IN JUNE 1975. HIS OFFICER CORPS WILL BE HUMILIATED IF THEY ARE "DEFEATED" IN LEBANON AND, IN SUCH AN EVENTUALITY, ASSAD CANNOT EXPECT TO COME AWAY WITH HIS PRESTIGE INTACT.

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3. ASSAD APPEARS INCREASINGLY CONVINCED THAT THE CONTRADICTIONS BETWEEN HIS GOALS IN LEBANON AND THOSE OF SOME ELEMENTS OF THE KATAEB AND THE LIBERALS ARE TOO GREAT TO BE OVERCOME BY POLITICAL AND DIPLOMATIC MEANS ALONE. HE KNOWS THAT HE CANNOT DESTROY FULLY THEIR POWER, BUT, IN THE WORDS OF ONE SYRIAN WITH GOOD INTELLIGENCE CONNECTIONS, HE WISHES TO "REDUCE THEM TO THEIR NORMAL SIZE"--THAT IS, HE DOES NOT WANT THEM ANY LONGER TO EXERCISE A VETO OVER THE DECISIONS OF THE CENTRAL GOVERNMENT. SYRIA WISHES TO LEAVE LEBANON WITH A CENTRAL AUTHORITY AND CONFESSONALLY BALANCED ARMY INTACT HAVING SUFFICIENT POWER TO FACE DOWN THE VARIOUS MILITIA FACTIONS. IT WANTS A GOVERNMENT THAT WILL PERMIT THE PLO TO MAINTAIN AN CONTINUING POLITICAL, IF MUCH RESTRICED MILITARY PRESENCE, ON ITS SOIL; AND PERHAPS MOST IMPORTANTLY, IT WOULD LIKE A LEBANON CLOSELY ALLIED TO SYRIA--PARTICULARLY IN THE CASE OF HOSTILITIES WITH ISRAEL. IF THE SYRIANS EVER HAD ANY ILLUSIONS ABOUT "TAKING OVER" LEBANON, THREE YEARS OF FIGHTING PALESTINIANS, LEFTISTS, AND RIGHTISIT HAS CURED THEM OF THIS. ASSAD WANT OUT, BUT HE WANTS OUT WITH HIS PRESTIGE INTACT AND WITH SUFFICIENT POLITICAL RETURN ON HIS INVESTMENT TO JUSTIFY HIS ORIGINAL DECISION.

4. ASSAD'S GOALS APPEAR IRRECONCILABLE WITH THOSE OF THE  
RIGHTISTS WHO WANT TO MAINTAIN DOMINANT MOAONITE CHRISTIAN  
POWER OVER LEBANON BY PUTTING AN END TO AN ORGANIZED  
PALESTINIAN MOVEMENT ON THEIR LAND. FAILING THAT, THEY  
WILL TURN INEXORABLY TO THEIR LONG-HELD, FALL-BACK POSITION  
OF A SEPARATE CHRISTIAN MINI-STATE--A STATE THAT SYRIA  
WILL OPPOSE BY ALL MEANS POSSIBLE. THE RIGHTISTS UNDER-  
STAND THIS AND SEE THE REMOVAL OF THE SYRIAN PRESENCE AS A  
SINE QUA NON OF ACHIEVING THEIR ASPIRATIONS. INCREASINGLY,  
ISRAEL IS SEEN AS THE ONLY PARTY CAPABLE OF ASSISTING THEM  
IN THE IMPLEMENTATION OF THEIR PLANS.

5. THE MUTUALLY SUSPICIOUS PERCEPTIONS THE SYRIANS AND

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RIGHTISTS HOLD OF ONE ANOTHER HAVE LARGEY BECOME SELF-FUL-  
FILLING PROPHECIES. SYRIA VIEWS MOST OF THE PHALANGE  
AND LIBERAL LEADERSHIP AS OUTRIGHT TRAITORS TO LEBANON AND  
THE ARAB CAUSE, WHILE THE MILITIAS SEE THE SYRIANS AS AN  
OCCUPATION FORCES BIASED IN FAVOR OF THE PALESTINIANS AND  
MUSLIMS. THESE CONTRADICTIONS AND SUSPICIONS ARE LIKELY  
TO LEAD TO A SERIES OF INTERMITTENT ARMED CLASHES  
CULMINATING IN A FINAL TEST.

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6. TO DATE, IT SHOULD BE RECOGNIZED THAT DESPITE SYRIA'S SOMETIMES BRUTAL BOMBARDMENT OF EAST BEIRUT, IT HAS NOT AS YET OPTED FOR THIS FINAL TEST. IF THE SYRIANS WISHED, THEY COULD HAVE KIKNAPPED OR ASSASSINATED SENIOR RIGHTIST LEADERS (E.G., BASHIR GEMAYEL) OR CARRIED THE FIGHT ON THE GROUND INTO EAST BEIRUT AND THE MARONITE HEARTLAND. THEY APPEAR TO HOPE THAT THEY CAN SCARE THE MILITIAS INTO SUMBMISSION-- AN UNLIKELY PROSPECT FROM OUR VANTAGE POINT.

7. THE SYRIANS HAVE NOT GONE ALL OUT FOR SEVERAL REASONS. THEY DO NOT WANT TO TAKE UNNECESSARY CASUALTIES IF THEY CAN ACCOMPLISH THEIR GOALS ANY OTHER WAY. THEY DO BELIEVE

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THAT MANY CHRISTIANS ARE INTIMIDATED INTO SUPPORT FOR THE MILITIAS AND DO NOT WISH TO APPEAR TO BE WARRING AGAINST ALL CHRISTIANS (A BAD TACTIC IN ANY CASE FOR THE RULING ALAWITE MINORITY HERE). WHILE THEY UNLIMITELY ARE WILLING TO PERMIT SARKIS TO RESIGN, THEY REALIZE THAT WOULD FURTHER ERODE THEIR LEGITIMACY AS A PEACE-KEEPING FORCE ACTING ON BEHALF OF THE CENTRAL AUTHROITY. MOST IMPORTANTLY, THEY DO NOT WISH A WAR WITH ISRAEL AT A TIME WHEN THEY ARE BEREFT OF RELIABLE ALLIES AND ARR ILL-PREPARED TO WITHSTAND ISRAELI MILITARY ACTIONS.

8. ASSAD ON PAST OCCASIONS HAS BACKED DOWN IN THE FACE OF ISRAELI PRESSURE--MOST NOTABLY IN JANUARY 1977 IN NABATIYYA AND MORE RECENTLY DURING ISRAEL'S INVASION OF SOUTH LEBANON. HOWEVER, ON NEITHER OF THESE OCCASIONS WERE THE STAKES AS HIGH AS NOW. IF ASSAD CANNOT REDUCE THE POWER OF THE KATAEB AND THE LIBERALS, HIS LEBANON POLICY IS IN SERIOUS DANGER AND THE MUCH-FEARED PARTITION OF LEBANON MAY WELL OCCUR. HIS OPTIONS ARE LIMITED, AND IT IS BY NO MEANS SURE THAT HE WILL BE ABLE TO BACK DOWN IN THE FACE OF ISRAELI MILITARY ACTION IN SUPPORT OF THE CHRISTIANS MUCH AS HE MIGHT LIKE TO DO SO. THERE ARE ALSO INDICATIONS THAT THE SYRIANS MA MISJUDG ISRAELI RESOLVE GIVEN THE PRESENCE OF UNIFIL AND UNDOF IN SOUTH LEBANON AND THE GOLAN RESPECTIVELY. AND THEIR BELIEF THAT THE US DOES NOT WANT A MIDDLE EAST WAR AND WILL

CURB THE ISRAELIS.

9. IF SYRIA DOES EVENTUALLY BACK DOWN AND FOREGOES REDUCTIN  
RIGHTIST STRENGTY, THEN ASSAD MAY ULTIMATELY HAVE LITTLE  
CHOICE BUT TO FULFILL HIS THREAT TO WITHDRAW FROM BEIRUT  
OR EVEN LEBANON ITSELF. IN SUCH AN EVENTUALITY, IT IS  
LIKELY THAT HE WOULD GIVE THE PALESTINIANS, MURABITUN,  
FRANGIEH, AND OTHER ENEMIES OF HIS ENEMIES THE WHEREWITHALL

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TO REIGNITE THE CIVIL WAR ON TERMS FAVORABLE TO THEMSELVES.

10 ASSAD WILL DO EVERYTHING IN HIS POWER TO AVOID A STARK  
CHOICE BETWEEN FULL-SCALE HOSTILITIES WITH WITHDRAWAL. FOR  
NOW, HE HAS INTENSIFIED DIPLOMATIC EFFORTS TO DEFUSE THE  
CRISES HAVING MET IN THE LAST WEEK WITH FUAD BOUTROS,  
WALID JUMBLATT, KAMAL AS'AD, AND FOREIGN MINISTER OF KUWAIT  
AND SAUDI ARABIA, AND THE GREEK ORTHODOX PATRIARCH, AMONG  
OTHERS. HEVING LEARNED THAT THE BOMBARDMENT OF THE CHRISTIANS  
NEIGHBORHOODS OF BEIRUT WAS UNACCEPTABLE TO MANY QUARTERS  
EVEN TO THE FACE OF PROVOCATIONS, HE HAS SET ABOUT TRYING  
TO PROVE THAT SYRIA WISHES TO BE REASONABLE BUT IS CON-  
FRONTING UNREASONBALE DEMANDS FROM THE RIGHT. HE IS TRYING  
TO DEMONSTRATE THAT SYRIA'S FIGHT IS NOT WITH LEBANESE  
CHRISTIANS BUT THE LEADERSHIP OF THE PHALANGE AND  
THE LEBERALS. HE HAS LITTLE TO LOSE FOR THE MOMENT BY  
GIVING OTHERS THE CHANCE TO USE DIPLOMACY. IF THEY FAIL  
AND IT APPREARS THAT HE ACTED REASONABLY, HIS HAND WILL BE  
STRENGTHENED IN REVIVING THE MILITARY OPTION.

11. THE CHOICE FOR THE US MAY BOIL DOWN TO QCQUIESCING  
IN A FURTHER FRIFT TOWARD FULL APRTITION OF LEBANON OR  
PERMITTING AND HELPING SYRIA TO WEAKEN THE RIGHTIST MILITIAS  
AND CREATE A CENTRAL AUTHORITY WHICH IS BEHOLDEN TO SYRIA  
FOR ITS SURVIVAL UNTIL A LEBANESE ARMY CAN BE BUILT. UNDER  
CURRENT CIRCUMSTANCES WE CAN ONLY ENDORSE THE POLICY OF  
COUNSELING RESTRAINT ON ALLPARTIES AND WORKING FOR A  
MODUS VIVENDI TO, AT LEAST, BUY TIME WHILE DELICATE MIDDLE  
EAST NEGOTIATIONS CONTINUE. HOWEVER, TIME MAY FAST BE  
RUNNING OUT DESPITE WHAT WE DO AND SOME HARD CHOICES MAY  
HAVE TO BE MADE.

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## Message Attributes

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